Thinking Things Over

By VERMONT ROYSTER

State of the Dialogue

When Senator Fulbright talks about the nation's foreign policy—which he does often and at length—he always has a great deal to say about the war in Vietnam, none of it encouraging to President Johnson or cheerful sounding to anybody.

The Senator thinks our military position there is precarious, our diplomatic posture deplorable and that the two together risk a catastrophe.

But this particular war in this particular place is, to the Senator, only an incidental part of the discussion; although since this is the place where men are dying it naturally dominates the headlines and no doubt overshadows the other things in the minds of his listeners.

Those other things the Senator talks about include Cuba, the Dominican Republic, General de Gaulle and NATO, foreign aid, CIA practices and the tone of diplomatic speeches about the cold war. Through all his comments on these subjects there runs a single theme, that the United States is overreaching itself.

"America is showing some signs," he recently told the nation's publishers, "of that fatal presumption, that overextension of power and mission, which brought ruin to ancient Athens, to Napoleonic France and to Nazi Germany."

When Vice President Humphrey talks about the nation's foreign policy—which he does less often, perhaps, but at greater length—his view of the Vietnam war is that our diplomacy has already been successful and that our military efforts are succeeding.

But the Vice President too carries the conversation beyond Vietnam. Mr. Humphrey justifies our efforts there not just by the intrinsic importance of South Vietnam but in terms of the wider obligations of the United States as a world power.

"Those who threaten their neighbors (anywhere) need to know," the Vice President told this same meeting of publishers, "that the United States will stay and see it through." And again: "The total application of power and strength . . . is a part of our security structure."

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Thus both men, protagonist and antagonist, are going beyond the immediate questions of the battlefield and addressing themselves to the more generalized question, What role can and ought the United States play in influencing affairs in a troubled world?

If nothing else, this puts the dialogue where it should be.

Obviously there are problems in Vietnam specific to that place and which cannot be resolved by resort to generalities. Wisely or not, we are there; being there we have to deal with what "is" and not with what "might be." To some extent, therefore, debate on the broader question—the proper role of the U.S. in the world—can seem academic, even metaphysical. Philosophy rarely offers practical means of getting out of a mess.

But to military commanders strategy is no less important than tactics; to a nation foreign policy is no less so than what it does at a particular moment. In war and diplomacy, wise strategy and policies are guardians against messes.

We got into Vietnam because of a certain view of the world and our role in it. The same view, with the same judgments flowing from it, should—if they are correct—propel us into like action somewhere else where the circumstances appeared similar. This might be another place in Asia, or almost anywhere on the globe.

As a matter of fact, it has involved us militarily in other places. In Korea during Truman's Administration. In the Middle East during Eisenhower's Administration. In the Dominican Republic during Johnson's Administration. All in addition to Vietnam during three Administrations.

Of all the confrontations, only the Cuban missile crisis involved an immediate, direct threat to our safety. Each of the others was predicated on the philosophy that the United States has a responsibility everywhere, or on the view that our safety is threatened by any disturbance to order anywhere.

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Throughout all this there has been an implicit assumption that the United States is so strong that we can do all this. We are so rich we can uplift all the backward countries with our largess, so powerful in arms we can exercise military control wherever needed, and all without sapping our reserves, physical or spiritual.

What Senator Fulbright has done is to challenge the view and the judgments from it. This is a wholly different thing from the protests against the Vietnam war itself from congenital pacifists, emotional beatniks, youthful shirkers or any of the others who just don't want to be bothered with anything troublesome, like a war.

Mr. Fulbright can often sound querulous. Sometimes he makes his arguments in bad taste. His judgment on practical questions isn't always impressive. Often he's just plain irritating.

Nonetheless, the Senator is debating the questions a Senator should. And he is bringing to that debate the kind of provocative thought that you always hope for, seldom expect and rarely find in the public forum.

So doing, he has forced those with the responsibility for policy to re-think the reasons for that policy and to put their plea for it in more thoughtful terms. They too—witness Vice President Humphrey—must raise the debate to a higher level. You can't answer the Fulbright questions with the same sort of retorts you use to peace marchers, muddled professors and unwashed undergraduates.

If there's a pity in it, it's that this Senatorial task of probing, questioning and challenging should not have been undertaken by someone on the Republican side of the aisle. That task is the proper function of the Opposition; constructive, not destructive, for as Burke remarked, "He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skills. Our antagonist is our helper."

Maybe at times the arguments are disruptive. But what better way to strengthen our nerves, as well as sharpen our skills, than a dialogue on the purpose, place and [illegible] world?